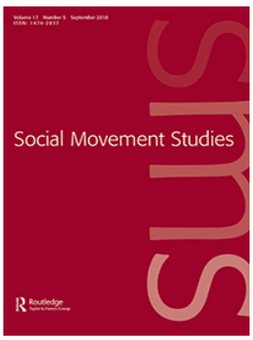

Social Movement Studies

ISSN: 1474-2837 (Print) 1474-2829 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csms20

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To cite this article: Markus Holdo (2019): Cooptation and non-cooptation: elite strategies in response to social protest, Social Movement Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2019.1577133

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1577133

Published online: 18 Feb 2019.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1577133

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Cooptation and non-cooptation: elite strategies in response to social protest

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ABSTRACT

The risk of cooptation – of being absorbed by powerful elites without gaining new advantages – is an important concern in studies of social movements and social change. Through cooptation, elites undermine movements by stripping them of their credibility as agents of change. This paper aims to explain why, despite its powerful rationale, cooptation does not occur more frequently. Building on political process theory and relational sociology, it demonstrates that cooptation appears rational only on the condition that cooperation is valued lower than political domination. But elite-movement interaction may result in mutually strategic relationships that are conditional on each side's recognition of the other's interest. Two empirical cases illustrate this possibility: the US Civil Rights Movement and Latin American participatory budgeting. In both cases, the actors involved chose a strategy of 'mutually assured autonomy' over cooptation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 August 2017
Accepted 29 January 2019

KEYWORDS
Co-optation; power; social movements; protests; autonomy

Cooptation is the elite strategy[1] of using apparently cooperative practices to absorb those who seek change – to make them work with elites without giving them any new advantages (Selznick, 1949, p. 34; Gamson, 1975, p. 29; Piven & Cloward, 1977, p. 30).[2] When cooptation is successful, those who seek change alter their positions when working with elites, hoping to gain new strategic advantages through compromising, but those advantages do not come and instead the elites' position prevails. In contrast to violent suppression, cooptation may accomplish the goals of the elites without significant political or financial cost. The ultimate consequence is that the challengers become politically irrelevant.

The risk of cooptation is a frequent topic of discussion in social movement studies as well as among activists. One might expect, therefore, that cooptation occurs routinely. This paper explains why this is not the case – why, in fact, cooptation sometimes does not even appear to be the rational choice of strategy, from the perspective of elites.

In social movement studies, there are several important works that have aimed to conceptualize and explain cooptation (recently, e.g. Trumpy, 2008). However, *non*-cooptation has received much less attention. This is a serious neglect for two reasons: first because, theoretically, non-cooptation is the more puzzling outcome (why *would not* the powerful coopt dissidents if this means gaining advantageous at low cost?)

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and second because, empirically, successful cooptation does not occur as frequently as one might expect.[3] This paper agrees with recent arguments for focusing on forms of interaction between elites and social movements that are better described as 'conflictual cooperation' (Giugni & Passy, 1998, p. 83) than unconditional support or merging (see also Bozzini & Fella, 2008; Davidson, 2018). Conflictual cooperation, means, for both sides, transferring knowledge, competencies, and resources, working toward a shared goal and direct negotiations (Giugni & Passy, 1998). The question this paper deals with is how such cooperation becomes possible in terms of mutual respect for the other's interests, that is, without cooptation.

The most established explanation for why cooptation does not always occur is that movements are sometimes able to use some form of countervailing power to resist cooptation efforts (Wampler, 2010; Murphree, Wright, & Ebaugh, 1996; Swan & Fox, 2010). This paper does not reject this explanation, which rightly emphasizes that the feasibility of cooptation depends, in part, on the resources and organizational skills of the challengers (Lapegna, 2014; see Gamson, 1975; Wampler, 2007; Fung & Wright, 2003). However, this paper questions a more basic assumption, made by both sides of the discussion: that whether or not cooptation may be *feasible*, it is always the first preference of elites. This paper argues, on the contrary, that sometimes cooptation should not appear as the rational strategy to promote elites' interests.

I begin by outlining an analytical perspective for studying elites' responses to social mobilization. An important point of this perspective is that elites (and movement leaders) do not always see the defeat of others as instrumental to their own success, as do actors involved in zero-sum games. Instead, they are often capable and inclined to consider others' interests and perspectives, and to reinterpret or reshape the conditions that constrain their possibilities of action. In the second section, I reconstruct the logic of cooptation and specify the conditions under which this strategy would seem reasonable. In the third section, I outline an alternative logic, according to which the powerful elites should instead support movements' formation and independence. The goal, according to this theory, is to benefit from an external source of legitimization. The means to that end is a strategy of 'mutually assured autonomy,' because movements can provide legitimacy to the goals and power positions of the elites only if they are recognized as independent. To support this argument, I construct two theoretical scenarios to which the logic of mutually assured autonomy applies and use two empirical cases for illustration: the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and Latin American experiences with participatory budgeting councils. These two cases are contrasted to the case illustrating the logic of cooptation: the Arab Spring youth movement. In the two cases that illustrate the logic of non-cooptation, elites reasonably aim to gain trust and legitimacy through public interactions with independent actors that represent the movement's cause. These two examples do not exhaust the possible scenarios in which it would be reasonable to aim for mutually assured autonomy, rather than cooptation. On the contrary, they are meant to demonstrate that there are at least some situations in which it may appear rational not to coopt challengers. By demonstrating this, the paper is intended to encourage exploration of additional scenarios in which elites may reasonably choose to support the autonomy of protest movements.

Theoretical perspective: strategic action, relational analysis, and conceptual tools

The aim of this paper is to construct explanations of cooptation and non-cooptation that are of general relevance and validity. To explain movement actions and elite actions in such general terms, social movement scholars have often utilized rationalistic approaches to social action that aim to specify the objective conditions that produced a certain action. In this paper, while I aim for a rationalistic and generalizable explanation of non-cooptation, a crucial aspect of the analysis is its focus on the interaction between objective structures and the intentions and exchanges between political agents. Imaginative and socially skilled actors may reshape the conditions of their actions and the opportunities available to them. Similar to how earlier political process theorists have incorporated framing and other aspects of social interaction as part of explanations of movement outcomes, I apply a *relational* perspective to elite-movement interactions, which acknowledges that the relationship between structures and social interaction is one of mutual dependence. In this section, I outline the theoretical framework that informs the arguments of this paper.

Strategic action

The goal is to understand the rationality of each type of strategy and specify the conditions under which each strategy seems reasonable. This analytical approach assumes that actors 'do things for a reason' and that actors 'involved in comparable power games in other contexts would act and interact in much the same way' (Bengtsson & Hertting, 2014, p. 21; see also Hedstrom, 2005, p. 61). I aim to demonstrate that elite actors (see endnote 1 for a definition) have *reasons* to coopt in certain situations, while in other situations, where the circumstances are different, they have reasons *not* to coopt.[4] The assumption is not that cooptation and non-cooptation strategies are always, or even often, the result of explicit calculations on the part of elite actors (see Coy & Hedeen, 2005, p. 409–410), but only that people's actions generally respond to incentives and disincentives. One type of action that seems reasonable in one context may therefore not appear as reasonable in another, if the conditions differ (Powell & DiMaggio, 2012; Tilly, 2001). The analysis is thus focused on the reasons as to why actors would be expected to act in certain ways. For the purpose of illustration, I use two cases for which documentation is publicly available through previous research and documents. In both cases, I claim that elite actors appear to have found reasons *not* to coopt, in contrast to other cases, in which elite actors may have reasons *to* coopt.

Relational analysis

The type of analysis offered in this paper thus assumes that actors behave in accordance with situation-specific reasons. In this sense, it is a rationalistic analysis, but it departs from some conventions in rational choice–type game theory (see Fligstein, 2001). First, it does not make the assumption that elites and movement leaders see the defeat of the other side as instrumental to their own success. What goals and strategies actors decide upon is the result of both of their assessments of possibilities and their interactions with others (see Emirbayer, 1997). Second, it does not assume that interactions between movement leaders and elites can be explained,

and predicted, based on a static analysis of the resources available to the actors and other objective conditions (see McAdam, 2010). Structural conditions influence social and political interactions, but do not determine them. As argued by political process theorists, movement leaders and elites base their decisions also on their, and others', normative ideas, which may themselves structure which actions are possible and thus become 'objective' in the sense of functioning as conditions that enable and constrain actions (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 2001; Polletta, 1999). This means that social interactions may both be *shaped by* social structures and, conversely, *shape* such structures. For example, McAdam's early work (McAdam, 2010) emphasized the importance of the interaction of three factors: structural changes that create new opportunities, organizational resources that help facilitate mobilization and cognitive, inter-subjective processes in which people attach meanings to their situations (McAdam, 2010, p. 105). This perspective, in contrast to earlier approaches, highlighted how the actions of movement leaders, as well as elites, depended not only on objective conditions but also in subjective, and inter-subjective, interpretations of their situation.[5]

The idea of such a two-way interaction between social action and social structure has been most clearly developed by advocates of a *relational* perspective (Emirbayer, 1997; see also Crossley, 2001). In this paper, I apply this perspective to situations where cooptation should, from the rational choice perspective, arise as a possibility, in order to show how the logic of cooptation, and cooperation, is contingent upon the actors' interpretation of their situation. The logic of cooptation, I argue, sets in only when the actors believe they are involved in a zero-sum game, where either the elites prevail or the challengers do. This is very seldom the only possible view of a situation, even if it may appear that way in contentious moments. On the contrary, coordinated action is often possible if the actors involved are able to think creatively about how the interests of both could be promoted at the same time. For example, stable political power must be partly based on a deep and widespread sense of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a case of an inter-subjective condition that affects what actors can and cannot do politically. In the classic definition, legitimacy is the diffuse belief that the current order and structures of power correspond, at least in some ways, to one's own ideas of what is right and just (Easton, 1965; Tyler, 2006). Legitimacy is a political resource that needs to be constantly reinterpreted and renegotiated, based on beliefs and core values, in interactions between people. The need for legitimacy influences political strategies in ways that rational choice (or 'substantialist') perspectives would miss. Cooptation, by contrast, may seem reasonable because it effectively undermines the opposition, but cooptation does not generate willing and habitual acceptance and obedience – the kind of unreflexive support of the governed upon which stable governments rely (Levi, 2006). Instead, it decreases opposition only by undermining civil society's capacity for collective action and contention. The perspective employed here, which is still clearly rationalistic in its focus on what would make sense strategically for the actors involved, acknowledges that what is strategically advantageous in a situation depends on which actions may generate and sustain sufficient legitimacy to be able to mobilize and move collectively. Legitimacy, which is constructed and negotiated by social actors, may in this sense become part of an enabling and constraining structure.

Conceptual tools: trust, legitimacy, and mutually assured autonomy

Building on earlier work informed by political process theory (see Caren, 2007; McAdam, 2010), my analysis examines interactions between elites and movement leaders that could result in cooptation but often do not. To explain non-cooptation, I focus on the actors' understanding of the interests of their counterparts, the constraints posed by the need for legitimacy and the ways in which the actors are able to establish a relationship of mutual trust that is sufficient to coordinate actions. This analysis also draws on previous works that have stressed social actors' need to build relationships of trust to facilitate cooperation (Ostrom, 1990; Cook, Hardin, & Levi, 2005). As Cook has shown, this often requires them to acknowledge a relationship of mutual dependence (Cook et al., 2005, ch., 3). Moreover, elite actors and social movement leaders are, in Fligstein's sense, 'socially skilled actors' who 'empathetically relate to the situations of other people and, in doing so, are able to provide those people with reasons to cooperate' (Fligstein, 2001, p. 112). While the relational perspective employed here is generally skeptical of prescribing specific interests to actors, legitimacy arises frequently (if not constantly) for political elites as both a constraint and an aim. Moreover, because there may be significant disagreement on a specific issue within an elite group, gaining legitimacy through cooperation with outside groups is often necessary to advance a specific political agenda. The search for legitimacy generally points them to non-cooption strategies that demand building relations of trust that can allow for forms of cooperation that generate legitimacy. This paper explores the situations in which elites may reasonably find, in this way, that their interests are best promoted with the support of an independent social movement, rather than through cooptation of that movement. I conceptualize this recognition as 'mutually assured autonomy' to stress that the respect for each other's need for legitimacy is a condition for trust between elites and movement leaders.

The scenarios in which elite actors and movement leaders find that they should adopt the strategy of mutually assured autonomy should be widely relevant to understand non-cooptation, although further research is needed to further specify its conditions and limitations. Mutually assured autonomy adds an analytical tool for studies of conflictual cooperation (Giugni & Passy, 1998). Previous studies have shown that such cooperation often involves repeated cooperation and sometimes institutionalization. For example, Bozzini and Fella (2008) argue that institutionalized conflictual cooperation, in which social movement organizations share some general goals with political elites, allows them to bring their ideas and expertise to bear on political processes. The concept of mutually assured autonomy specifies how such cooperation is possible without undermining the interests of either sides.

The logic of cooptation

Since Philip Selznick's (1949) study of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and his related shorter article, *Foundations of Theory of Organization* (1948), the term cooptation has been used to describe the situation in which an oppositional movement is effectively captured by the more powerful group or organization that the actor is trying to influence. Let us clarify the types of situations in which cooptation becomes

a relevant and possible strategy. Cooptation is preceded by contention (or alternatively, an identified possibility of contestation arising in response to current or planned actions). Contentious politics, moreover, is facilitated and encouraged by the perceived weaknesses of the elites. Activists respond to shifts in perceived opportunities (McAdam, 2010). Wars, high and long-lasting unemployment figures, financial crises and corruption scandals often create such changes in opportunity structures, whether or not they are the problems that initially caused the emergence of movement organizations (see McAdam, 2010, p. 41). The logic of cooptation sets in if the elites recognize that their agenda, or their legitimacy, is called into question by the movement organization (Selznick, 1949, p. 34; Coy & Hedeen, 2005, p. 412).[6]

For example, in the case of the TVA in Selznick's study, the need identified by the federal government to expand access to electricity in the American rural South through water power plants by the Tennessee River required confronting anti-government sentiments and resistance toward interference in the South's agricultural sector. One significant obstacle to the project was that racial segregation and non-egalitarian power relations, which served the interests of local agricultural institutions and organizations, were maintained through a general resistance toward large federal state projects. Both the local leaders of the agricultural sector and the federal government recognized the significant challenges facing the project. But the federal government found a solution: it framed the TVA project in the most effective way to disarm the challengers, namely, as a project that was born from a process of grassroots democracy. Including southern farm organizations directly in the project planning and implementation made it significantly less objectionable and effectively brought potential troublemakers over to the side of the federal government. The outcome was that the potential leaders of local resistance came to 'own' the process; the strategic framing of TVA as a project that came from grassroots democracy created 'an ideology in which everyone affiliated with the TVA deeply believed' (Stivers, 2009, p. 1196).

The need for cooptation, in this case, stemmed from the perceived incompatibility between the strategic goals of the elites and the interests, identities or beliefs of important actors in the agricultural industry. As Selznick comments: "The organizational imperatives which define the need for cooptation arise out of a situation in which formal authority is *actually or potentially* in a state of imbalance with respect to its institutional environment (Selznick, 1948, p. 260, emphasis added). In Selznick's study, cooptation is employed already to thwart *potential* challengers, even before the contestation has actually begun.

Cooptation thus serves to undermine actual or potential mobilization on the part of movement organizations, which may arise because of shifts in political circumstances. For example, dramatic events, such as wars, corruption scandals or financial crisis, may shift the balance in favor of hitherto marginalized or irrelevant interests, 'either by seriously undermining the stability of the entire political system or by increasing the political leverage of a single insurgent group' (McAdam, 2010, p. 42). As movements challenge the elites, the elites must defend their positions in ways that are effective under the circumstances. Actions aimed at coopting the challenging movement can, in this situation, lead to an outcome that is preferable both to violently suppressing protests (which is costly both financially and politically) and to concession (which is also costly politically, since one risks appearing weak, as well as financially, if it implies

redistribution of resources). Compared to suppression and concession, cooptation accomplishes success at relatively low cost. This is because by adopting the discourse of the (potential or actual) challenger, it effectively undermines its subversive potential and the challenger's status as a platform for critique and protests. What makes cooptation different from more genuinely cooperative strategies, such as corporatism (where stakeholders are included in the processes of negotiation in terms of mutual recognition) or deliberation (where the different sides meet to figure out together where, if anywhere, interests may overlap or merge) is that it brings the opposition over to the side of the elites and creates a new situation: the challengers now have an interest in defending the position of the elites.[7] As Selznick writes:

> One means of winning consent is to coopt elements [of actual or potential opposition groups] into the leadership or organization, usually elements which in some way reflect the sentiment, or possess the confidence of the relevant public or mass. As a result, it is expected that the new elements will lend respectability or legitimacy to the organs of control and thus reestablish the stability of formal authority (Selznick, 1948, p. 34).

In other words, by bringing potential or actual opposition groups into the leadership or organization, elites hope to use the credibility of that group to its own benefit by pushing over the responsibility for the political priorities; the opposition group then 'owns' the program it threatened to stop. Cooptation, says Selznick, means that the challengers share 'the *responsibility* for power rather than power itself' (1948, p. 34).[8] This is why they can no longer challenge, only support, the existing system and the power of the elites. At this point, the movement is effectively disarmed, at least in the capacity of challenger, because either the whole movement or a significant part of it has shifted its goals, or only the leadership of the movement has done so, with the consequence that it no longer has sufficient credibility as representatives of the movement's cause in the eyes of the movements' core activists.

Because the goal of cooptation efforts is to undermine (actual or potential) opposition groups by tying their legitimacy as actors to structures of power, cooptation always takes place, to a significant degree, in public. This is important because cooptation only works if representatives of supposed opposition groups are now seen to be part of the elite and to invest themselves in the elites' agenda. This does not rule out, of course, that negotiations hidden from public view may be necessary to accomplish this. Moreover, that cooptation takes place in public does not mean that it is uncomplicated to judge whether an actor has, in fact, been coopted. Examples of cooptation tend to be contested (as the value-laden character of the term cooptation stems from its association with the betrayal of the cause).

By way of illustrating the logic of cooptation and the contexts in which it appears relevant, consider the Arab Spring youth movement in Egypt after the uprising of 2011. Having had initiated and helped organize the protests that led to the ousting of the president, General Hosni Mubarak, the youth movement had become a potentially powerful pro-democratic force. In this situation, the military establishment was not only ousted from the presidential palace, but also faced legal trials and investigations into human rights violations and corruption during Mubarak's rule. The Muslim Brotherhood, the main opposition group during the years of the military dictatorship, won the presidential election with their candidate, Mohamed Morsi, and promised to

change the character of the state. The military establishment still had the means to violently return to power, although this seemed a politically costly option. A new opportunity for comeback emerged as youth activists, under the name of Tamarod, began to protest against President Morsi, questioning his commitment to democracy and human rights after controversial statements on the place of Islam in the new constitution and the role of women in Egyptian democracy. President Morsi also allegedly failed to handle the post-revolution economic crisis and there were rumors of a hidden undemocratic agenda. The protests were, in themselves, compatible with the initial cause of the Arab Spring mobilization for political change, but targeted the new, democratically elected administration. The military establishment, led by General al-Sisi, saw a window of opportunity. By bringing the democratic youth movement over to their side, they would gain leverage, as well as room for maneuvering. Motivated by their frustration with Morsi's administration as well as by their own elevated public recognition after the Arab Spring, the leaders of Tamarod became increasingly explicit in their support for al-Sisi, and ultimately supported the military coup that restored the dictatorship (see Holdo, 2017 ; Abdalla, 2016). Tamarod's decision to side with al-Sisi undermined the youth movement's credibility as a pro-democratic force; it had chosen to support a clearly undemocratic leader, whose first priority after securing power was to massacre and imprison political opponents (Holdo, 2016).

This example illustrates several aspects of the logic of cooptation. Cooptation becomes a relevant option when elite groups lack sufficient legitimacy to pursue their agendas. By rebranding itself as a champion of the Arab Spring, the military elites successfully made Tamarod its ally, thereby undermining a political obstacle. Cooptation was clearly preferable to both violent suppression, which would have caused protests and international condemnation, and concession, which would mean a loss of political domination. Through cooptation, al-Sisi managed to share responsibility for the outcomes with Tamarod's leaders, including massacres of political opponents. Al-Sisi did not share power, however. As a pro-democratic force, Tamarod was effectively eliminated, since its credibility as such was destroyed. It could no longer credibly claim to be a watchdog for human rights abuse or authoritarianism, but could only remain politically significant by continue supporting General al-Sisi. Consequently, when al-Sisi gave his support to the Syrian government's violent suppression of a popular uprising, Tamarod applauded it. When a-Sisi banned the April 6 Youth Movement, which had played a central role in organizing the initial Arab Spring protests, and imprisoned its leaders, Tamarod gave its public approval. As a consequence of the elimination of the pro-democratic youth movement, the military government gained more freedom to suppress political opponents and carry out its agenda without resistance.[9]

Because cooptation is a means of undermining the opposition, it can only be a rational strategy if this is a rational goal. If cooptation is feasible, it is preferable to more costly options such as suppression and concession. But what if undermining opposition does not appear as the most rational goal? What if, for example, there are some, limited but significant, overlaps of interests between the movement organization and the elites? In such cases, the value of cooperation would have to be weighed against the costs of not pursuing all the goals the elites have decided. And what if the elites cannot amass sufficient legitimacy on their own to carry out their policies effectively? In such cases, the elites would need to weigh the benefits of increasing legitimacy through

cooperation against the costs of depending on a strategic relationship in terms of boundaries of action. In both cases, it may turn out that cooperation is the preferable option on balance. As this indicates, cooptation has limited relevance, as it presupposes that the costs of dependence outweigh the benefits of cooperation. Cooptation is only rational if the elites see the interaction with the movement organization as a one-time event, not as part of a longer, strategically important relationship. As such it approximates a prisoner's dilemma situation (see Hardin, 2002). As Figure 1 illustrates, the optimal outcome for each side is where one defects while the other cooperates. In the upper right cell, the movement organization cooperates, while the elites seek to take advantage of the situation to undermine the movement and thereby undermine a political obstacle. This is the scenario in which cooptation applies.

The logic of mutually assured autonomy

Cooptation does not occur as frequently as one may assume, not only because it is not always feasible, but also because, in certain situations, elites may not even find it desirable to coopt a movement that opposes their goals. According to the logic of cooptation, as described above, the end result is that the credibility of the oppositional movement as a force for change is undermined. Cooptation is aimed at undermining the opposition. But this goal is not always rational. On the contrary, rather than bringing the challenger over to the elites' side to undermine its leverage, the elites should instead, in certain situations, encourage and support the formation of an independent field of activism and help maintain its sense of independence. This strategy, which I call *mutually assured autonomy*, is the opposite of cooptation. It applies to situations in which the elites aim not to undermine challengers, but instead for legitimization through an external and credible source of positive evaluation. Below, I discuss the strategy of mutually assured autonomy in general terms. I then illustrate this strategy with two empirical examples that illustrate how actors may come to interpret their situation in such a way that this strategy makes more sense than cooptation. I end the section, following the outline of the

		Elites	
		Cooperate	Defect
Movement Organization	Cooperate	2, 2	**4, 1**
	Defect	1, 4	3, 3

(x, y) x = movement organization, y = elites. In each cell, the first payoff is movement organization's, the second the elites'. Payoff of 1 means it is player's first choice, 2 second choice, etc.

Figure 1. The cooptation game as a prisoner's dilemma (x, y) x = movement organization, y = elites. In each cell, the first payoff is movement organization's, the second the elites'. Payoff of 1 means it is player's first choice, 2 second choice, etc.

theoretical framework described previously, by highlighting in more general terms how their recognition of a mutual interest in legitimacy made it possible for elite actors and movement leaders in these cases to trust one another and act together, while still acknowledging each other's independence.

The strategy of mutually assured autonomy

This strategy appears rational if there are significant benefits to gain from continued cooperation, which exceed the potential costs of dependence on the relationship to the movement. In this scenario, elites see the interaction with the movement as the beginning of a strategic relationship. The best possible outcome is that the parties gain legitimacy from cooperation, as illustrated in Figure 2. In some cases, cooperation never begins, because the elites choose to aim to undermine the opposition and not mutual legitimization. In some cases, cooperation stops, as the movement continues to attack the elites. But in the optimal case, movement leaders agree to conditional cooptation, hoping, for example, to gain credibility by publicly demonstrating political influence. The elites cooperate on similar conditions, hoping to gain legitimacy among the movement's activists and supporters.

This scenario is one in which the two sides have what Hardin (2002, p. 4) calls 'encapsulated interests', that is, a relationship in which one trusts the other party to reciprocate because one thinks it is in that party's interest to attend to one's own interests. In this case, both parties recognize that they have an interest in a continued strategic relationship, and they also recognize that the other side has this interest too. Cooperation with movements may have various values for elites. They may bring

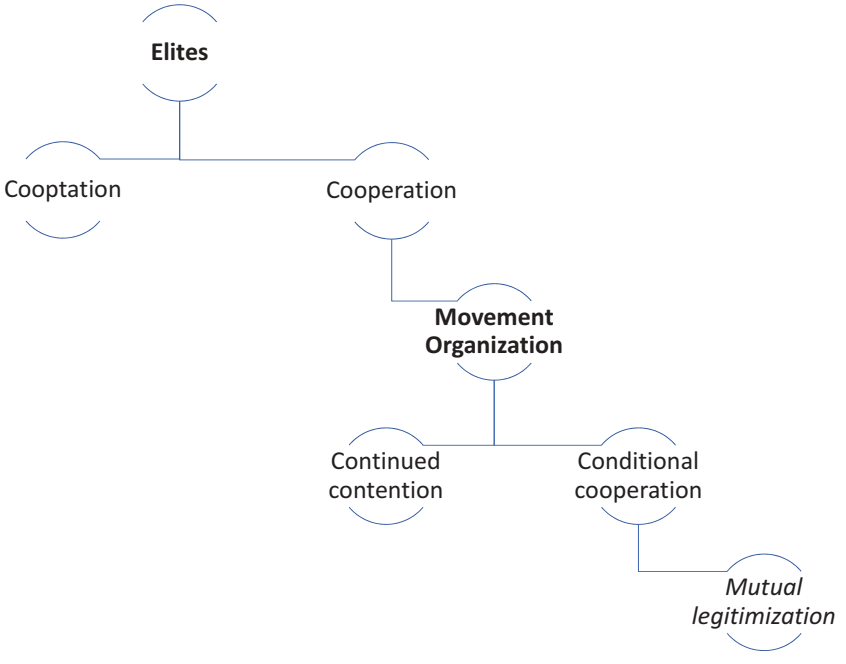

Figure 2. The path to mutual legitimization.

unique knowledge and competence to decision-making procedures, or resources that make implementation more efficient (see Cohen & Rogers, 2003; see also Giugni & Passy, 1998). What may often make elites most cooperative, however, is if movements can create opportunities for elites to strengthen their standing and political legitimacy among people with whom the goals of these movements resonate. Legitimacy makes it possible to advance a political agenda in ways that were not possible before (Tyler, 2006). Thus, both sides depend on the relationship. At the same time, the relationship depends on both parties' recognition of the other side's autonomy with respect to advancing political goals and being held accountable to the interests of their respective political bases.

There are at least two scenarios in which mutually assured autonomy (that is, non-cooptation) should appear more reasonable than cooptation: (1) when the movement's interests overlap with the elites' interests with regard to specific policy-making and (2) when political trust is so low in general that the elites' agenda is difficult or impossible to realize unless some new and legitimate way of interacting with relevant groups of citizens can be created. In both cases, concession costs are low, either because goals overlap or because the elites' goals are unattainable without cooperation. The elites, therefore, recognize that actual or potential movements may, even if they challenge the status quo, help support developments that are in the interests of both sides. Moreover, they also recognize that actual or potential movements may play such roles only (or at least more effectively) if the elites and the movements mutually respect one another's autonomy. Thus, the elites (e.g. the current president or the ruling party) are not expected to be acting in the name of the movement and neither is the movement expected by the elites to be acting in their name. The coordination only works if the actors are seen, and see themselves, as separate actors.

To work, the strategy of mutually assured autonomy requires public interaction of some form, in which each side demonstrates commitment and sincere belief in the value and potential benefits of participating in a political process of cooperation, negotiation or deliberation. However, both sides understand that the movements' participation in such interaction must be conditional and that the movement organization does not agree to 'own' the process or the results, even if they invest symbolically and politically.

Interpretive processes and structural conditions: a relational analysis

I will illustrate this strategy with two examples, drawing on previous research of elite-civil society interaction. The purpose is to illustrate how actors may come to interpret their situation in ways that favor the strategy of mutually assured autonomy over cooptation. It is not necessary to discuss the selection of these cases in detail, but I have intended to take examples that are at least sufficiently different to indicate that the logic of mutually assured autonomy should be quite widely relevant. Further research will have to specify more precisely the conditions and limitations of this strategy.

Scenario 1: movement creates opportunity to advance politically risky agenda

In the first scenario, the elites see the emergence of a social movement as an opportunity to gain sufficient support for a preferred, but so far unfeasible, political decision of reform. In such a case, the interests of the movement are seen to overlap with the interests of the elites, and therefore there the elites have little interest in coopting or otherwise undermining the movement. On the contrary, a strong and independent movement may actually be needed to achieve the elites' goals.

The continuous interactions and deliberations between President Lyndon Johnson and the black protest movement in the 1960s, and most importantly between Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr., exemplify this first scenario. Johnson's support for the movement is partly explained by the new political opportunities that the movement opened for Johnson. In particular, by enforcing African Americans' effective rights to vote, Johnson would gain a significant electoral advantage.[10] To do this, he respected the movement's independence and encouraged it to make him respond with political action.

As commonly noted, Johnson had not previously had a record of championing racial equality, having been an opponent to all proposed bills for civil rights (including anti-lynching bills) up to 1957 as a lawmaker. However, in making civil rights a priority, and securing the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*, he gained crucial support from black voters in the presidential election of 1964, winning a still unprecedented 94% of the black vote. This created new possibilities for Johnson, but also for King, with whom he began, in December 1964, to discuss the next step: a bill to force southern states to guarantee the freedom to vote for African Americans. As is well-known, the two disagreed about the timing of the new bill, but they agreed about its desirability (Branch, 2007; Dittmer, 1986). For Johnson, advocating black citizens' right to vote meant further alienating white voters in the South. But it also meant an opportunity to increase the electoral participation of African Americans, a point King stressed to convince Johnson to act. As he pointed out to Johnson, the only Southern states that Johnson had not won, were the five states in which less than 40% of the black population had registered to vote.[11]

There was a mutual understanding between Johnson and King that the success of their cooperation depended on mutual respect for the other's commitments: as president, Johnson relied on broad support, including from white Democrats from the South, and King depended on wide support for the movement's cause, including from legitimately frustrated youths who might consider more radical alternatives (Malcolm X was one rival movement leader). The relational perspective is important for recognizing that, while the interactions between them were often complicated, they were characterized by a deep understanding of the stakes involved for the other. This is indicated, for example, in the phone call on 15 January 1965, the eve of the beginning of the marches in Selma, Alabama, in which Johnson expresses his liking for the idea of showing the public the discriminatory treatment blacks experienced as they sought to register to vote: 'You find the most ridiculous illustration you can on voting, and point it up, and repeat it, and get everybody else to.' As Taylor Branch comments on the conversation, Johnson had sought 'to confide a crowning ambition to win the right for Negroes to vote … King, on his heels, had mumbled approval. He did not mention that he was headed to Selma for that very purpose – knowing that Johnson would not welcome his tactics of street protest' (Branch, 2007, p. 14)

King understood Johnson's political motives for supporting the cause as well as the political obstacles for doing this too openly, and he understood the point of view that respecting certain political limits might favor the interests of the movement. At the same time, he sought to push those limits further by challenging Johnson through continued demonstrations. Johnson, on his part, knew that he could only gain sufficient support to get the voting rights bill passed with the help of a powerful social movement. John Lewis, who as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was among the leaders organizing the March on Washington in 1963 and the Selma campaign in 1965, comments on the relationship between the movement and Johnson, and the struggle for effective voting rights in 1965: 'It was my understanding that President Johnson wanted to wait and not move so fast. He said in effect: I have just signed the Civil Rights Act. We don't have votes in Congress. If you want me to get the bill passed – make me do it. … Create the political pressure, create the climate, the environment (MSNBC, 2015).'[12]

Johnson benefited from the legitimacy granted by King and other leaders of the black protest movement, which they were in a position to provide because of their credibility among a wider public, and in particular, black citizens. This credibility, moreover, depended on the strong commitment they showed to the black communities of the South, which allowed them to work with political elites without their loyalty being questioned. Both sides understood that this commitment was where the power of the movement ultimately rested. King's and other leaders' credibility remained strong throughout the period of close cooperation with Johnson, and was later used to protest against the president's policies, most importantly the Vietnam war.

To put this logic of action in more general terms, in this first scenario, mutually assured autonomy appeared reasonable to the actors involved because the movement's interests seemed to overlap with elites' interests with regard to specific policy-making; powerful elites recognized that the movement may, even if they challenged the status quo, help support developments that are in the interests of both sides. There was disagreement among elites, as there typically is, and due to such disagreement, the primary power-holder, the President, needed cooperation with the movement leaders. This actor recognized, moreover, that the movement could play this legitimizing role on the condition that elites and movement leaders mutually respected one another's autonomy. In order that cooperation work in the interest of both, the actors must be seen, and see themselves, as separate but mutually supportive, and mutually dependent, actors.

Scenario 2: social mobilization creates possibility for external legitimization

In the second scenario, political trust is so low in general that elites' agenda is difficult or impossible to realize. Their interactions with activist leaders and potential or actual challengers, therefore, tend to be guided, in part, by an interest in increasing trust and improving their own public image. In such a case, social movement leaders may provide new sources of legitimacy, but only if they are recognized as independent from elites.

The Latin American experiences of participatory budgeting councils illustrate this second scenario. Participatory budgeting may provide precisely what elites need in such situation, a new and legitimate form of interaction between them and relevant groups of citizens. Participatory budgets are a form of state-initiated and institutionalized citizen deliberation, in which representatives of a city administration meet weekly

with elected local community leaders to discuss budget priorities and develop new projects to improve conditions. The meetings usually occur during the larger part of a year, and the process ends with a public referendum in which citizens select the projects to be implemented (see Abers 2000; Wampler, 2010).

As previous research has shown, participatory budgeting often leads to cooptation (Wampler, 2010; see also Baiocchi, Heller, & Silva, 2008). It is easy to see why, because participatory budgeting builds on a radical imagination of grassroots politics and gives crucial roles to community organizers and activists, but is also usually aimed at building support for a specific political agenda (see Goldfrank, 2011; Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014). Participatory budgeting has often been initiated in moments of shifting power elites, after electoral victories of left-wing parties. Participatory budgeting has served to establish new power structures and capitalize on connections with leftist social movements. As the new insiders establish new forms of collaboration under the guise of radical grassroots democracy, movements face the challenge of cooperating under terms that suit their own interests too. The outcome depends on more specific aspects of the interactions between elites and civil society.

In Rosario, Argentina, the financial crisis of 2001 created the political opportunities for participatory budgeting to be initiated and to play a significant role in state–civil society relations. Citizens' distrust and even contempt for the political elites could not have been more clearly indicated, as massive protests forced the president of the republic to resign. The mobilization leads to the creation of spontaneous citizen assemblies, in which citizens met to deal with urgent problems because the state's normal functions were seriously disabled. These practices helped inspire the city mayor to initiate participatory budgeting meetings (modeled on previous experiences in Porto Alegre, Brazil). From the beginning, this was a pragmatic way of dealing with intense protests and frustration with governmental institutions. Over the years of its existence, participatory budgeting has evolved into an arena for local social activists to demand changes in the government's priorities (Holdo, 2016).

What is particularly important to note about this form of institutionalized interaction is that it can only serve its purpose, for the local government as well as for the participating activists, if both sides respect, to sufficient degree, the principle that participants work *with* the government but *for* their communities. It is only as external actors that they can provide legitimacy and increase political trust (Holdo, 2016). In other words, both sides need to adopt mutually assured autonomy as their strategy. In Rosario, elites and civil society leaders developed a common sense of the stakes involved through continuous interactions over several years. The local government came to recognize that it could gain credibility through participatory budgeting by using the citizen councilors as an external source of legitimacy, instead of trying to coopt them (see Holdo, 2016, p. 391). On their part, participating civil society leaders saw participatory budgeting as a way to increase both their standing within their own communities and their power to pressure the elites to invest in projects that would improve living conditions in the marginalized parts of the city. Both sides thus depended on the cooperation of the other to reach what was seen as the best outcome for both: sustained cooperation would lead to public recognition for participating citizens and to increased political legitimacy for the local government.

These experiences with participatory budgeting are not unique in this regard. Local governments elsewhere, too, recognize the need to work with individuals who are recognized and respected as community leaders. Winning their trust is instrumental for increasing the legitimacy of governmental practices. At the same time, skilled political actors will recognize that community leaders can only maintain their credibility in the eyes of their communities if they are recognized as an independent – as working *with* the representatives of the state but *for* the interests of the community. For this reason, it is only if this sense of community recognition is upheld that the cooperation of the movement leaders is valuable for the elites. In more general terms, participatory budgeting may be seen as a case in which low political trust, at the outset, provided new political opportunities. From a movement perspective, participatory budgeting meant applying a grassroots perspective on democracy that could encourage mobilization around demands for change of political priorities. From a governance perspective, it was seen to have the potential to change the public perception of political elites and of the opportunities for popular participation, generating legitimacy as well as stronger belief in democratic participation.

Trust, legitimacy, and mutually assured autonomy

By stressing both the strategic interests and the interactions that generate inter-subjective meanings, I have sought to explain why cooptation does not appear more frequently, despite its widely accepted rationality. Cooptation may appear preferable to both concession and suppression, but this choice presupposes that the elites are playing a zero-sum game. In the two cases discussed above, the elites found they could benefit from an external source of legitimacy, which made it reasonable not to coopt movement leaders. This recognition was the result of interactions with movement leaders who strategically aimed to capitalize on their ability to generate such legitimacy, but only if they were seen as independent from the elites. The elites and the movement leaders had reason to trust one another's intentions because each of them appeared to have an interest in promoting the public recognition of the other. In more general terms, the need for legitimacy and recognition functioned as structural constraints, interpreted and mediated through elite-movement interaction, that made a certain kind of strategy appear reasonable. These constraints, moreover, are themselves the results of interpretive processes by which constituencies come to trust leaders to represent their interests in interactions with the other side in a process of contention and negotiation. The relational analysis helps highlight this two-way relationship between objective structures and inter-subjective meanings, which in this case helps account for the strategic interest in mutually assured autonomy, instead of cooptation.

What I have sought to accomplish with this investigation is to show that elite interests are not fixed in the way assumed in previous treatments of the risk of cooptation. On the contrary, what elites ultimately seek to achieve is often contingent upon the interactions they have with movement leaders, who may often effectively signal their own importance to the elites in that they are able to exchange legitimacy for recognition and political change.

Notes

1. The terms 'elites' and 'elite strategy' are used throughout this article. By elites, I mean any group or organization that has the power to make the decisions that the 'challengers,' in this context a protest movement, hope to achieve through their actions. In the context of social movements, the relevant target elites are usually political elites or economic elites, but could in principle be any group that fits that description.
2. Some treatments of the topic discuss cooptation in a narrower sense, for example the case in which a government offers particularly powerful supporters certain benefits to retain their loyalty (Fjelde & De Soysa, 2009). Gamson, moreover, discusses 'cultural' cooptation, for example through an appropriation of discourse, customs and symbolic gestures (Gamson, 2005). These are subsets of the general strategy of cooptation.
3. This is at least indicated by the empirical literature. Take, for example, William Gamson's (1975) classic study of outcomes of social protests between 1800 and 1945, from which social movement scholars usually take their definition of cooptation. Among his 53 cases, Gamson classifies only five cases as cases of cooptation.
4. For this paper, it is not necessary to measure the actual extent of successful cooptation. The examples used in this paper serve to illustrate the *logic of the strategies* of cooptation and non-cooptation, not to establish that cooptation did actually succeed in specific cases.
5. An important critique of this approach is, however, that political process theorists often fail, in practice, to acknowledge that the connections between the objective, structural level and the subjective, cognitive level, run both ways. As Polletta (1999) argues intersubjective, normative meanings may often become institutional, thereby moving to the objective, structural level (see also Holdo, 2018 and Hayward, 2013).
6. Thus, cooptation arises as a possibility if an oppositional movement threatens to obstruct the elites' plans. In many cases, this might not be the case. In some cases, the elites' preferable choice of action may be not to respond at all, if there is a possibility that the movement may disappear or defeat itself.
7. This is not always seen as the ultimate consequence of cooptation (e.g. Trumpy, 2008).
8. Selznick's separates 'formal cooptation' from 'informal cooptation' in which the elites actually share power, but only with a small group that does not have any significant impact on the agenda of the elites. The latter form of cooptation, writes Selznick, 'is typically expressed in informal terms, for the problem is not one of responding to a state of imbalance with respect to the "people as a whole" but rather one of meeting the pressure of specific individuals or interest-groups' (Selznick, 1948, p. 35). I reserve the term cooptation for what Selznick calls formal cooptation. Informal cooptation is not, strictly speaking, cooptation, because it is not about 'acceptance without new advantages' (Gamson, 1975, p. 29).
9. Gupta (2012) offers an interesting discussion of a less dramatic example of cooptation, that of the US organization, MoveOn, and shows that the perception of cooptation affected its possibilities of cooperating with the more radical Occupy movement in 2011.
10. There are many other factors that contributed as well (see Eagles 1986; Luders, 2010; Morris, 1984).
11. Telephone conversation, 15 January 1965 (Miller Center, WH6501.04).
12. See also the similar account by Andrew Young, director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a leader of the movement (LBJ Presidential Library, 2014).

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank participants at the ECPR workshop "Integration or Cooptation?" for excellent feedback on an earlier version of this paper, especially the workshop directors Nicole

Deitelhoff and Katrin Uba, the discussant Robert Davidson, Feliz Anderl, Priska Daphi, Raffaele Bazurli, and Theresa Gessler. He also thanks Bo Bengtsson and two anonymous reviewers for helpful suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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